

Article by Sam Bryant

YEAR OF WONDERS

By Geraldine Brooks

INTRODUCTION

Born in 1955 in Sydney, Australia, Geraldine Brooks is an award-winning journalist and author. She worked for a number of years as a feature article reporter for *The Sydney Morning Herald* before winning a scholarship to complete her Masters degree in the journalism program at the prestigious Columbia University. After this she worked as a foreign correspondent at one of the world's pre-eminent financial newspapers, *The Wall Street Journal*. Often working on the frontline of world political hot spots, she reported on crises in the Balkans, Africa and the Middle East.

She is the author of two major works of nonfiction, *Nine Parts of Desire* (1995) and *Foreign Correspondence* (1997). Her first novel, *Year of Wonders*, was an international bestseller and her second novel, *March*, won her the 2006 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Her latest novel, *People of the Book*, has also won critical acclaim and become an international bestseller.

Her inspiration for writing *Year of Wonders* came from a visit to Eyam, a small village in Derbyshire, England, in 1990. Here she learnt of the incredible true story of the Eyam villagers' decision to quarantine themselves in 1665–1666 when they discovered that they were suffering an outbreak of bubonic plague, also known as 'the Great Plague' or 'the plague'. Over two-thirds of Eyam's population perished as a consequence of this plague outbreak. While she did not

immediately embark on writing the novel, the stories of the villagers' plight and seemingly selfless decision played upon Brooks' imagination for the next ten years. *Year of Wonders* was first published in 2001.

BRIEF SYNOPSIS

Year of Wonders is narrated from the first person perspective of an 18-year-old woman, Anna Frith. Widowed as the result of her husband's tragic mining accident two years prior to the commencement of the story, Anna is left to support herself and her two young sons, Tom and Jamie, with her modest income from tending her own flock of sheep and working as the housemaid for the local rector Michael Mompellion and his wife Elinor. While Anna has already endured great hardship and heartbreak in her young life, she and the other inhabitants of Eyam live largely peaceful lives until the outbreak of the plague in the autumn of 1665.

The plague's origins in Eyam lie in a seemingly innocuous piece of cloth sent from London to Anna's boarder, the tailor George Viccars. Shortly after receiving the cloth, Viccars begins to exhibit the gruesome tell-tale symptoms of the plague: fever, pus-filled and exploding lymph nodes, aching joints, bloody vomiting and decaying flesh. Not long after Viccars' death, the plague claims the lives of Anna's two young sons and most of the neighbouring family, the Hadfields. It is not long before the plague has engulfed Eyam and it eventually claims the lives of more than half of its population.

The charismatic and evangelical Michael Mompellion convinces the villagers that they must quarantine themselves to prevent the spread of the plague to surrounding areas. While the villagers are initially galvanised by their faith and local spirit, it is not long before they turn on one another as a result of the devastation wrought by the disease and the claustrophobic atmosphere of the self-imposed quarantine.

Death visits nearly every household in Eyam and as the villagers seek answers and justification for their plight, many are consumed by fear, anger and desperation. There appears to be no cure for the plague and many villagers abandon their faith and turn to superstition and witchcraft in an attempt to deliver themselves from the horror. In some cases, the siege mentality brought on by the scourge sees the townspeople direct their fears towards marginalised and misunderstood characters who become easy targets for accusations of witchcraft. This irrational apportioning of blame leads to senseless acts of violence and even murder. Others seek to appease God through flagellation and extreme self-deprivation in the belief that they are appeasing God's wrath for their innate sin. Unfortunately, the plague also brings out the darker side in some characters' human nature as they seek to benefit from others' misfortune during a time of crisis.

Nevertheless, *Year of Wonders* is also a story of courage, compassion and rebirth. Despite great suffering, Anna and other characters such as Michael and Elinor Mompellion demonstrate that humanity can triumph over adversity through self-sacrifice, friendship, love and a belief in the preservation of human dignity.

By the end of the novel, the plague has abated in Eyam and Anna has been transformed. Through the necessity of circumstance, the encouragement from Elinor Mompellion and her own courage, Anna becomes the local midwife and healer. Readers witness Anna's emotional and intellectual growth throughout the novel as a result of her relationship with the Mompellions and her exposure to the extremities of the plague. She is no longer subservient to anyone. She has thrown off the manacles of her abusive childhood, the spectre of the plague, religious dogma and even the patriarchy of the time. She has had to flee Eyam to ensure her own safety and that of an illegitimate child marked for death. The child's father, a member of the local gentry, is enraged at having being cuckolded (betrayed by an unfaithful wife) and seeks to destroy the evidence of his wife's betrayal. Anna escapes from England and begins a new life in Oran (in modern day Algeria), the home of the Andalus Arabs. At the conclusion of the novel Anna

has become a doctor, scholar and mother whose compassion and talents mark her as woman of independence and strength.

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

The Great Plague

The Great Plague of London (1665–1666) was a massive outbreak of bubonic plague that is estimated to have killed 100,000 people, or around 20 percent of London's population. Also simply known as 'the plague', the infection was caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis* which was carried by the fleas of black rats. The bubonic plague had been in Europe since 1348 and in the latter part of the 14th century it is estimated to have killed between 30 and 60 percent of Europe's population. There had been plague outbreaks in Britain prior to 1665, but this instance was known as the 'Great Plague of London' due to its unprecedented severity.

The drastic measures undertaken by authorities to control the spread of the disease demonstrated the grip that the plague had on the city of London. Dogs and cats were thought to have spread the plague and so the Mayor of London passed a law that saw over 40,000 dogs and 20,000 cats killed. Anyone who had come into contact with a plague sufferer had to carry a coloured staff (a pole) so that they could be avoided. When a person contracted the plague, all members of his or her household were sealed in their residence for 40 days or until the plague victim survived or perished. Guards were stationed at the door to prevent anyone from escaping. The rich largely abandoned the poor by fleeing London. Many of the nobility and gentry escaped London soon after the first outbreak of the plague and were followed by lawyers, merchants, clergy and surgeons.

Such events make the true story of the village of Eyam all the more heroic. Just as in *Year of Wonders*, the local rector convinced the village to quarantine themselves. Local histories suggest that the plague is thought to have originated

in cloth received from London, just as it does in Brooks' novel. Some accounts of the Eyam 'Plague Village' put the number of dead as high as 259 of the 292 villagers.

Role of women in 17th-century England

The structure of society in 17th-century England did not afford women positions of power or public responsibility in village life. Women were generally confined to the domestic sphere and were seen as managers of their household. In most cases women were expected to act for the enhancement of their family, largely through serving their husband and taking care of their children. Women's opportunities for education were limited as it was believed that an educated woman might compromise her desirable qualities of innocence and morality. The law and church further enforced patriarchal gender roles by making daughters and wives little more than chattels (assets) of their fathers and husbands. Fathers would choose when and to whom their daughters would be married. A woman was not meant to publicly disagree or challenge her father or husband. Nevertheless, as the century progressed, women started to use their influence within the home to indirectly affect social, political and economic matters.

The morality of the time dictated that a woman must remain a virgin until marriage, and appropriately virtuous and obedient to her husband thereafter. Village women who spoke out against the dominant patriarchy of the time risked exile or ridicule. An unmarried woman who dared speak or act against the accepted gender roles of the period made herself vulnerable to persecution and, in extreme situations, accusations of witchcraft. Promiscuity was not only frowned upon, but left women open to persecution by those who sought to impose the strict religious moral codes of the period.

Apart from domestic duties, women would often tend to livestock if their family owned any, and they might also be employed as a dairymaid. The highest paid form of employment was midwifery. The study of religion was thought to be an

acceptable method of self-introspection for women. Unsurprisingly, during the 17th century some women used religious writings to make veiled criticisms of the dominant social and political institutions of the time.

Politics and religion

Year of Wonders is set in the village of Eyam, Derbyshire, in England in 1665–1666. While England had enjoyed nearly 70 years of domestic peace prior to 1642, the next 18 years saw great religious and political upheaval in Britain. Charles I was a monarch who believed in ‘the divine right of Kings’ and he had a volatile relationship with his parliament. England was plunged into three civil wars over an 11-year period between those forces who supported the monarchy and those who supported the parliament. Charles I was eventually executed for treason and the major political force that followed him was Oliver Cromwell. A prominent minister and military leader, Cromwell assumed the position of head of state and the title of Lord Protector of England in 1653 and remained in power until his death in 1658. After his death, the republic collapsed, Charles II was recalled and the monarchy reinstated.

While Charles I was king and head of the Church in England, some people saw him as reinstating Catholic ceremonial practices in religious worship. A number of these practices had been abolished under Henry VIII’s reformation of the Church of England. Furthermore, Charles I had married a Catholic and some prominent parliamentarians believed that this might lead to the possibility of a Catholic heir to the throne of England. Many of the people who sided with the parliamentary forces during the civil wars did so out of conviction that England should adopt a Puritan model of worship that abolished elaborate religious ceremonies and the need for bishops and church hierarchies that obscured the true meaning of the bible.

While Henry VIII’s establishment of the Church of England had dismantled the Catholic Church’s authority in Britain and changed religious practices and

ceremonies, many people didn't believe that this religious reform had gone far enough. Oliver Cromwell also believed in the need for greater religious reform in England and when he became head of state the Church of England was abolished along with episcopacy (a system of church government in which bishops are the chief clerics) cathedrals, Church Courts, the Book of Common Prayer and celebrations such as Easter and Christmas. When Charles II became king and the monarchy was reinstituted, the Church of England was once again made the major church. While there was greater tolerance of dissenters after this point in time, there were still laws that sought to protect the authority of the Church of England and discouraged other forms of Christian worship.

Anna Frith reveals that this period of turmoil had little political bearing on the town of Eyam as 'our village was far from any important road or vital strong point' and 'these great events barely lapped at the foot of our mountain and never caught any of us in their flow' (p.100). Nevertheless, this period of political instability did have religious implications for Eyam as Anna notes that the 'high matters of king and parliament' did have a bearing on 'the matter of how and with whom we prayed' (p.100).

The village's previous religious authority, a Puritan parson Thomas Stanley, resigned from his position in 1662 when he could no longer tolerate the authority and direction of the recently reinstituted Church of England. While laws were passed that meant that 'dissenting clergy should keep at least five miles from their old parishes' and there were harsh penalties 'for all meetings of more than five persons for any worship save that of Common Prayer' (p.100), it seems that Eyam turns a blind eye to those villagers, like the new Anglican rector Michael Mompellion, who still meet with Stanley.

It is possible to read *Year of Wonders* without an appreciation of the religious and political backdrop to the novel. Nevertheless, it is important to note how the grave effects of the plague overcome the religious differences that had previously divided Britain and resulted in mass bloodshed and persecution. When

Mompellion appeals to the villagers to quarantine themselves, he knows that his plan is bound to fail unless he can convince all of the villagers to stay in Eyam. Mompellion knows that villagers with Puritan beliefs, who are still loyal to Stanley, will need to see that Stanley also endorses such a plan. Mompellion and Stanley form a united front and are able to convince the villagers not to flee. Stanley even steps in briefly to give Mompellion's sermon when the rector collapses from exhaustion as the strain of his duties overcomes him. Stanley also reaches out to Mompellion during his crisis of faith following Elinor's tragic death. The effects of religion are a central concern of *Year of Wonders* and the novel questions the way in which religious fervour and segregation can narrow people's perception. A focus of the novel is the exploration of how people's concern for one another and the need to serve the greater good can overcome religious differences. Moreover, the courage and compassion of some of the villagers is the novel's affirmation of humanity's ability to overcome religious differences.

Science and the Enlightenment

The 17th century marked the beginning of humanism and the period known as 'the Enlightenment' in English society. The Enlightenment placed an emphasis on rationalism and scientific method in the belief that humans could tame, and claim control over, the natural world. In the latter part of the century, there was a growing belief that medical advances would eliminate disease and that famine could be overcome with new agricultural practices. Influential thinkers such as Francis Bacon advocated the principles of exact observation, measurement and inductive reasoning. Such principles led to significant breakthroughs in the study of plant and animal life that had major benefits in the field of science.

With these scientific advances came a questioning of religion's authority and of some previously unexplained mysteries. The establishment of natural laws in the field of science bred a belief that everything could be explained through links to the natural world. Such a belief saw a growth in humanism – the idea that

humans have the ability to shape their own destiny rather than being at the mercy of an omnipotent creator.

While organised religion was still the dominant influence on everyday life in England, there was a definite shift in the thinking of the political intellectual elite during the latter part of the 17th century. Old superstitions such as witchcraft began to be dismissed and many significant writers and artists of the period started to question and demystify elements of religious belief.

- How does the growth of Anna's character reflect the intellectual concerns of the Enlightenment in 17th-century England?

STRUCTURE, LANGUAGE & STYLE

Structure

Year of Wonders commences about two-thirds of the way through the chronological sequence of events covered in the novel. A narrative structure such as this is known as starting the novel's events *in medias res*, which is Latin for 'in the midst of things'.

The novel opens in autumn 1666 with Anna's recollection of how she 'used to love this season' (p.3). Her fond memories of apple harvesting and its accompanying sensory delights have been forever tarnished by the carnage wreaked by the plague over the previous year. Readers learn only vague details of the tragedies that have befallen the town of Eyam. The opening chapter also focuses on the broken and fallen state of the previously charismatic Michael Mompellion. Anna describes him as one of the living dead, and his words and actions are those of a bitter and haunted man (p.4). When Anna tries to wake him from his grief-induced torpor, he inflicts physical pain upon her by forcefully grabbing her wrist while trying to impress upon her the bleak nature of existence (p.19). Anna reveals that she only serves Mompellion out of her love for his

recently deceased wife, Elinor. We also witness his cold and harsh treatment of Elizabeth Bradford along with his apparent lack of faith and his contempt for the idea of a compassionate God (pp.16–19).

The opening chapter also hints that Anna has undergone a transformation during the past year. When going to confront Elizabeth Bradford she reveals that

It was as if there were two of me, walking down those stairs. One of them was the timid girl who had worked for the Bradfords in a state of dread, fearing their hard looks and harsh words. The other was Anna Frith, a woman who had faced more terrors than many warriors. Elizabeth Bradford was a coward. She was the daughter of cowards. As I entered the parlour and faced her thunderous countenance, I knew I had nothing more to fear from her (p.15).

Brooks' choice to start the novel *in medias res* is a deliberate attempt to provoke curiosity in readers as to why the characters find themselves in their current states. It encourages readers to contemplate the enormity of the force that has caused such devastation in the town of Eyam during the previous year.

Re-read the first chapter of *Year of Wonders*. After reading this chapter what are some of the questions that readers might want to ask about the following:

- Anna Frith
- Michael Mompellion
- the plague
- Elizabeth Bradford
- Elinor Mompellion?

Language

Brooks' use of language is notable for her descriptions of nature and the effects of the plague. Anna's links with the natural world are continuously reinforced by

her descriptions of events in metaphors and similes that make reference to humanity's relationship with the surrounding rural environment. Examples of this style are evidenced when Anna recounts her learning and her desire for knowledge. When Elinor recognises Anna's desire to learn, Anna reveals that 'she commenced to shovel knowledge my way as vigorously as she spaded the cowpats into her beloved flower beds' (p.36). Anna also builds her knowledge of the Bible by memorising tracts, 'adding to my harvest in the way a farmer builds his stook' (p.36). Such descriptions are in keeping with Anna's view of the world. She has grown up in a rural environment and interacts directly with nature and the landscape every day of her life. Her affinity with the natural world is further emphasised in her serene descriptions of nature's beauty and humanity's ability to live with and adapt to nature's cycles. Nevertheless, her frank admissions of nature's brute force serve as a stark reminder of the brevity of human life and its apparent insignificance in the face of the wider natural world.

In order to create a vivid picture of the horror of the plague, Brooks' narrator does not shy away from the grim realities that the novel presents. Anna suffers greatly at the hands of the plague and witnesses the pestilence in all its gory detail. It is appropriate that she recounts her experiences in graphic detail so as to create the reality of a world that most modern readers would not normally be forced to comprehend. Her account of George Viccars' plight as he lies 'with his head pushed to the side by a lump the size of a newborn piglet, a great, shiny, yellow-purple knob of pulsing flesh' (p.42) paints a graphic picture of a man in agony. Furthermore, Anna's descriptions of the pestilence often make use of corrupted nature imagery to convey a sense of decay.

- How do Anna's descriptions of the natural world convey humanity as simply another inhabitant of that world?
- What are some other examples of Anna's descriptions making use of corrupted nature imagery to magnify its effects?

It is also worth noting that although the novel is set in the 17th century, Brooks' prose style is distinctly modern. This is probably in keeping with a desire not to alienate contemporary audiences and not to make the experience of reading the novel any more difficult than it needs to be. Furthermore, the story of Anna's emancipation seems to have great resonance with modern feminist thought and this is also in keeping with a contemporary prose style. Nevertheless, Brooks' selective use of archaic vocabulary helps to provide the narrative with an authenticity and a sense that the events are taking place in 17th-century rural England.

Narrative voice

Year of Wonders is narrated from the first-person perspective of Anna Frith, an 18-year-old widower and mother of two young boys. Brooks obviously wants readers to feel and experience firsthand the struggles, emotions and growing awareness of the novel's young heroine.

Through this narration readers are privy to Anna's innermost thoughts without the judgements and implied values of a third-person omniscient narrator. This form of narration is most appropriate for a novel of historical fiction. While the novel is a work of fiction, it is based on a true story and the first-person narration is meant to help the readers suspend their disbelief and actually feel as though they are reading the account of someone who has experienced the horrors of the plague. Furthermore, readers are invited to feel all of Anna's emotional, moral and religious struggles as she experiences them. While Anna is a character of strength and integrity, we also share her candid moments of weakness and doubt, and these are included to make readers feel even greater empathy for her situation. It is also appropriate that a young woman who has to overcome great obstacles to attain a measure of control over her life should be able to express her own story rather than having it mediated through the perspective of an omniscient and controlling third-person narrator.

CHARACTERS & RELATIONSHIPS

Anna Frith

Anna is the first-person narrator and heroine of the *Year of Wonders*. It is through her transformation and emancipation that the major events and themes of the novel are explored. While her childhood is not the focus of the novel, readers learn that Anna's upbringing was particularly violent and marred by tragedy. Her father Josiah Bont's violent upbringing and alcoholism have 'made of him a sour and menacing creature' (p.36). Anna, her mother and siblings were subjected to numerous beatings and violent outbursts that still affect her. Her shoulder is permanently restricted as a result of being thrown against the wall at the age of six, and the psychological scars of seeing her mother muzzled in the branks (p.133) causes her to falter and cower at the feet of Josiah after initially standing up to him at the local inn. Anna's mother died when she was four and her stepmother Aphra offers her little in the way of protection from her father's outbursts except to tell him not to beat Anna too badly for fear that they will never be able to find her a suitable husband.

Anna is married off to Sam Frith at the age of fifteen and begins to experience a sense of stability for the first time in her life. She is happy to have a stable and protective husband and to be the mother of two young boys. Yet tragedy again strikes her life when her husband is killed in a mining accident that leaves her to raise two young boys on her own. When it looks like she might find stability once again through a possible marriage with her boarder, George Vickers the tailor, the plague takes him as its first victim and plunges the village of Eyam into chaos. Soon after, she experiences further despair when she loses both of her sons to the plague.

While at first it may seem odd to have *Year of Wonders* as the title of a novel that catalogues the horrors of a village beset by the plague, it is the transformation of Anna Frith that provides the title with its multiple meanings. On one level the

novel documents the tales of human suffering, depravity and heroism that could only leave readers in a state of wonderment. Nevertheless, the true wonder of the novel is the way in which Anna is transformed from an illiterate, god-fearing handmaid, who displays flashes of courage and natural intelligence, to a midwife, scholar, doctor and mother of two who frees herself from the shackles of domineering males and religious dogma. By the conclusion of the novel she is a woman truly in control of her own destiny. Furthermore, it is the journey she undergoes in this transformation that makes her an individual of special qualities. As Elinor realises, Anna's transformation 'is the one good, perhaps, to come out of this terrible year' (p.235).

Under the tutelage of the compassionate Elinor Mompellion, Anna's natural talents thrive as a consequence of the disastrous surrounding environment. With Elinor's encouragement she shows incredible courage to become the local midwife. Along with Elinor she acts as the local healer and through an empirical process akin to modern science and medicine, she researches, catalogues and prescribes the herbs in the Gowdies' garden in an attempt to combat the effects of the plague.

Anna also possesses an innate sense of courage, justice and compassion. Despite suffering physical violence she is the only person to stand up to a village lynch mob. This mob misdirects its fear of the plague towards the Gowdies by murdering them for unfounded allegations of witchcraft. Despite the danger to her own health, Anna's maternal instincts also see her tirelessly care for those who suffer from the plague (pp.88–95). She and Elinor even briefly become miners to save Merry Wickford's rights to the freehold on Merry's deceased father's mine. Anna's bravery and knowledge of risky mining processes enable Merry to keep her rights to the mine, but it almost kills Anna in the process (pp.174–88). Furthermore, she is the only character who seems to show concern for the wellbeing of her stepmother, Aphra, and half-sister, Faith, after the death of her father and half-siblings.

Anna also experiences moments of weakness and emotional conflict that allow readers to empathise with her. In her initial stages of despair after having lost her sons, she takes comfort in the release that opium brings (pp.138–144). With Elinor's help she rejects the temptation to continue using 'poppy', but she takes solace in knowing that there is probably a supply that she can locate somewhere in the Gowdies' garden if she needs it. Anna also suffers emotional turmoil when she cannot bring herself to speak on behalf of her father when he is found guilty of theft. Her sense of duty makes her feel as though she must defend him, but her sense of what is right and her need to escape his oppression sees her remain quiet (p.203). While she believes that Aphra will free Josiah from the stowes upon which his hands have been impaled, the guilt she feels after her father's death is an admission that she felt no great need to free him herself. Nevertheless, her guilt is alleviated by her emotional recount of her suffering and she consequently realises that it is only now that she can feel 'free of him' and 'able to think calmly once more' (p.210).

Similarly, Anna realises that if she remains in England her destiny will continue to be shaped by domineering males and the patriarchy of the period. While Anna and Michael Mompellion both take comfort in their brief and passionate affair following Elinor's death, she is shocked to discover how Mompellion's will and a religious zeal have dominated and perverted his marriage with Elinor and governed all of his actions (pp.282–3). Although a continued relationship with Mompellion would not be without associated risks, Anna makes the conscious decision to reject him and end the relationship for other reasons. Once Anna learns that Mompellion consciously prevented the consummation of his marriage to Elinor because he believed that he was saving her from her previous sins, Anna recognises the degree to which Mompellion's will has dictated his marriage. Mompellion appears to have been incapable of realising that Elinor's 'sins' have been brought upon her at the age of 14 through her entrapment by a man. His actions in wanting to save Elinor seem to have been dominated by a fanatical belief in his own powers of redemption and the male-dominated views of the

society of the time. While he now admits he was 'wrong in doing that, and wrong, most shockingly wrong, in what I asked of this village' (p.282) his apparent newfound desire 'at last to do as I please' casts his relationship with Anna in a very dark light (p.282). Anna recognises the force of Mompellion's will and feels that he has used her and committed a grave wrong against both she and Elinor. Anna ends the relationship determined not to be another victim of his domineering attitudes.

Anna also displays great courage and self-sacrifice when she decides to adopt Mrs Bradford's illegitimate son to prevent him from being murdered (pp.289–91). Anna's maternal instincts will not let her see an innocent and defenceless child die as a result of a domineering husband who would rather see his wife and unborn child perish to protect his misguided sense of honour. Once again, Anna puts the wellbeing of others ahead of her own. It is also significant that, although she accepts Mompellion's assistance to escape Derbyshire, she decides to flee England rather than live a life where she must rely on the generosity of Mompellion's patron (Elinor's father) to survive. While Colonel Bradford's relentless pursuit of her causes her to believe 'I did not make the choice so much as have it made for me' (p.299), her decision to board a cargo ship bound for Venice is one of immense bravery. Her decision to take control of her own destiny is vindicated in the life that she leads in Oran, the home of the Andalus Arabs. Although she is one of many wives to the doctor Ahmed Bey, she is so only 'in name if not in flesh' (p.301). The marriage exists simply to allow local society to accept her as part of Bey's household. Anna is free to pursue her studies to become a doctor and she regards Bey as 'the wisest and kindest man I have ever known' (p.301). Her presence in Oran even benefits the local women because their husbands allow them to see a female doctor rather than preventing them from receiving treatment from a male doctor. Once again she is a mother, but this time she has two daughters. She names Lady Bradford's child Aisha, after the Bey's word for life. The child conceived with Michael Mompellion she

names Elinor which, although not stated, has probably become Anna's own word for life.

- Would Anna have become such an independent woman without Elinor's support and encouragement?
- What are Anna's personal qualities that contribute to her transformation?

Elinor Mompellion

Elinor Mompellion is the wife of the Eyam rector, Michael Mompellion. While she is Anna Frith's employer, it is not long after their acquaintance that they become firm friends. It is a friendship built on mutual respect and admiration for one another's loyalty and compassion. Elinor is the major reason that Anna finds the strength to go on after the tragedies that befall her. Furthermore, it is Elinor who recognises Anna's hidden talents and her thirst for knowledge, and she teaches her to read and write. It is also Elinor who encourages Anna to become the local midwife, to help save Merry Wickford's claim to the family mine and to form their partnership as the new local healers. Elinor also acts as Anna's emotional support and counsels her in her times of doubt, such as the death of Anna's children and when she is threatened by the lure of opium's enchanting spell. She even confides in Anna her darkest secrets. Elinor embodies the notion of self-sacrifice and benevolence and for Anna 'she was my friend, and I loved her' (p.234).

Elinor is also a devoted wife to her husband. The public and private interactions of the Mompellions reveal a deeply loving and genuinely happy couple. Elinor is extremely worried for Michael's wellbeing when he drives himself to exhaustion at the height of the plague, and Michael is distraught when Elinor dies.

While Elinor loves her husband, there can be little doubt that much of her devotion to him stems from the great gratitude she feels for the manner in which he helps to resurrect her life. She is the daughter of a wealthy gentleman and her

idyllic, but sheltered, childhood of uninhibited learning leaves her vulnerable to the advances of an unscrupulous heir to a dukedom. After Elinor's scandalous elopement, ensuing pregnancy and subsequent self-inflicted abortion, her life unravels. As she battles grave depression she becomes addicted to the opium that is prescribed to keep her sedated. It is Michael Mompellion who rescues her from the abyss by showing her 'how futile it is to wallow in regret for that which cannot be changed and how atonement might be made for even the gravest sins' (p.154). Elinor uses the fervour of Michael's religious vision to rekindle her life.

Nevertheless, the religious fervour that binds them also distorts another aspect of their relationship. Despite Elinor's pleas, the darker side to Michael's religious zeal prevents them from consummating their marriage. Even though they love one another Michael believes that their sexual abstinence is the penance that they both must pay for Elinor's prior sin. Such a belief reveals the darker and controlling aspect to Michael's character and indicates that an essential part of Elinor's life has been far more regulated than it otherwise appears. While Michael's religious vision helps to rescue Elinor, in another way it also traps her in a marriage where she cannot express her natural passion because Michael believes her unrestrained desire is to blame for her previous sin.

Elinor is undoubtedly an extremely kind and generous character who wishes to help others and to see Anna reach her true potential. While some of her motivations to see Anna succeed are borne out of a love for her friend, she might also wish Anna to break free of some of the restrictions that she continues to experience in her own life. She admits to Anna that 'you were like a flame blown by the wind until it is almost extinguished. All I had to do was put the glass round you. And now, how you shine!' (p.235). Her tragic death has a major impact on the lives of Michael and Anna and both are left distraught.

- Why is Elinor such an important part of Michael and Anna's life?
What does her love and friendship provide for each of them?

- Who recovers first after Elinor's death? Why does this character recover first?

Michael Mompellion

Michael Mompellion is an extremely charismatic individual who possesses the power to convince people of his vision. Anna recognises the power of his voice that is:

full of light and dark. Light not only as it glimmers, but also as it glares. Dark not only as it brings cold and fear, but also as it gives rest and shade (p.45).

Mompellion's powers of persuasion are clearly displayed in his ability to convince the villagers to quarantine themselves in Eyam in order to protect surrounding towns from the plague. To do this, he skilfully appeals to people's sense of moral virtue and succeeds in uniting the villagers despite the existing religious divisions (pp.98–107). When the Bradfords flee Eyam it is Mompellion who becomes the town's unofficial leader during the crisis. Clearly, he is a figure who can unite people and provide them with hope during a time of emergency.

Furthermore, Mompellion possesses many admirable character traits that mark him as a man of compassion and moral integrity. He uses his authoritarian presence to quell public disturbances when the plague threatens to send Eyam into disorder and chaos. He also remonstrates with those characters who exploit the effects of the plague to take advantage of the weak and defenceless. He drives himself to exhaustion by seeking to honour his pledge to provide care and counsel to all those suffering the effects of the plague. He even takes on the job of the local gravedigger on top of his religious duties and this drives him to physical collapse.

On one level, Mompellion's belief in the need to quarantine the town is motivated out of an altruistic need to save other towns from the devastation of the plague. Nevertheless, the strength of his will and religious fervour fosters a darker side of

his character. While he is motivated to prevent the loss of life in other towns, he is also convinced that the plague is a result of God's desire to test the faith of his followers. If it is God's will to subject his people to the plague, then the villagers must endure it without questioning the reasons for such a test. Similarly, those who question Mompellion's interpretation of the plague are rebuked for not adhering to God's will. Mompellion does act out of a desire to help others, but his actions are in part motivated by his belief that God is personally testing him. While he is successful in his attempts to keep some semblance of unity in the town, his religious vision sometimes blinds him to other possible interpretations of the world around him. Moreover, he often makes his personal quest to satisfy God that of the entire village.

Most notably, Michael's religious preoccupations play a very large part in his relationship with Elinor. While he loves her deeply, he believes that her past actions are acutely sinful and for that reason they must both neglect their sexual desire for one another. He is unable to see that they would both be set free by acknowledging and accepting one another for who they are rather than dwelling on any perceived past indiscretions. Furthermore, his belief in Elinor's sin is predicated on a highly unsympathetic and patriarchal view of female sexuality. Michael acts in what he believes are Elinor's best interests, but his actions reveal his need to control and dominate his relationships with others.

While Mompellion's pronouncement to burn all the town's belongings seems to rid the town of the plague, this action appears to be the result of a divine vision rather than having any scientific or rational basis. After finally agreeing to give a thanksgiving sermon following the passing of the plague, his world is turned upside down by Elinor's senseless murder. Having weathered God's tests until this point, Elinor's death is the event that finally causes Michael to lose his faith in God. (pp.18–19, 263–71). Mompellion has displayed great strength in the face of adversity and has counselled others to remain strong in a time of crisis, but it appears that when he loses the person closest to him, he cannot see any justification for God's apparent lack of compassion. His inability to sometimes

see beyond his own world-view is also demonstrated when he fails to foresee Anna's incredulity towards his revelation regarding his marriage with Elinor. Despite his conflicted character, towards the end of the novel, there is the suggestion that Mompellion's relationship with Anna may have resulted in him adopting a changed perception of the world.

- What are some instances where Michael Mompellion reveals himself to be a man of compassion and bravery?
- What are some other instances where Michael Mompellion's darker side is revealed? Are these instances a result of the pressures of his job or his religious zeal?
- What evidence is there that Michael Mompellion is a changed man by the end of the novel?

THEMES, IDEAS & VALUES

Courage and faith

Year of Wonders explores the consequences of the courageous decision made by the people of Eyam to quarantine themselves within the boundaries of their own village rather than risk spreading the plague to surrounding towns. Whether the villagers made the decision out of a duty to God, as a result of Mompellion's coercion, or because they feared that they would not be received by other towns, their initial decision still displays immense bravery. Many people's reaction would be to flee in order to get as far as possible from the pestilence, but the villagers choose to stay to fight a contagion that they have little defence against. The real village of Eyam is still lauded by modern-day England for its extreme act of bravery.

Indeed, during the quarantine numerous characters display acts of self-sacrifice and valour that today's readers can only marvel at. While Mompellion is fuelled

by a religious fervour, he believes in caring for and counselling his parishioners even to the point where he physically collapses due to the burden that he has taken on. Elinor is a continual source of inspiration for both Michael and Anna, and she constantly puts herself in danger for the betterment of others. Unfortunately, her desire to protect Michael and the other villagers results in her death at the hands of a deranged Aphra. Anna, too, continually puts herself in harm's way by caring for the diseased, standing up for the unjustly persecuted and taking on responsibilities that she seems inadequately experienced to handle. She also often risks her own life to stand up for what she believes to be morally just.

While the story examines how the villagers' faith in God is strained by the plague, more significantly it explores how their faith in humanity is also put to the test. Despite the atrocities committed by some members of the Eyam community and the devastation caused by the plague, the most heroic characters are those that put aside their grievances and are willing to do what is best to maintain order and a degree of sanity within the community. The decision to put aside religious differences and to follow Mompellion's request to quarantine the village represents a belief in working for the greater good. The way in which characters such as Elinor, Michael, Anna and others put their own health in danger to comfort others in their illness displays a selflessness that affirms a need for human dignity and compassion.

- What are some specific instances of courage and compassion in *Year of Wonders* that affirm a sense of faith in humanity?
- What are some of the character traits of specific characters that allow them to display courage and maintain their faith in humanity?

The darkness within

While there are many examples of courage on display in *Year of Wonders*, there are many actions that betray a darker side of human nature. As the plague starts

to overwhelm Eyam, fear, anger and confusion start to take hold of many of the villagers. Their fear and lack of understanding of the plague lead to actions that display the worst aspects of human nature. The community's superstitions and ignorance of the plague's true origins fuel their need to apportion blame for the pestilence. The Gowdies are a pair of strong, educated women who do not conform to the roles expected of them in 17th-century society; their 'otherness' is threatening for many people in Eyam and it makes them the target for accusations of witchcraft. Their senseless murder at the hands of a crazed lynch mob is representative of some villagers' inability to understand their own innate capacity for evil.

Other characters such as Josiah and Aphra Bont use the plague to further their own self-interests at the expense of others. Josiah Bont is a man whose own childhood has been marked by exploitation and violence and this has psychologically scarred him. He is an abusive father and husband who drowns his own fears and insecurities in alcohol. Cruelty seems to come naturally to him and the plague brings out his worst character traits. After becoming the new town gravedigger, he extorts money from those who need his services and doesn't even wait until people have died before digging their graves. His actions in attempting to murder Christopher Unwin, burying him alive and then stealing his belongings (including the clothes Unwin was wearing) demonstrates the level of depravity to which he has succumbed. His actions are an unfortunate reflection of humanity's capacity for evil in a time of crisis. While the punishment that he receives is barbaric, and in some ways reveals the harsh nature of 17th-century justice, it could have been even worse as the Body of the Mine only charge him with theft, and not attempted murder.

Josiah Bont's wife Aphra also exploits the villagers' fear of the plague by pretending to be the ghost of Anys Gowdie and charging extortionate amounts for worthless spells. In the climate of confusion and despair, her actions are callous in the extreme and the villagers are outraged at her behaviour. The desire for revenge proves too great for Brand Rigney and Robert Snee and they

throw her into a stinking pit filled with pig manure (pp.244–6). Aphra almost suffocates and drowns, and only just survives the ordeal. She appears to emerge from the experience a completely broken woman. Anna acknowledges the darkness of the villagers' vengeful hearts when she reveals:

We were all of us like wounded animals, our hurts so raw and our fear so great that we would lash out at anyone, especially someone who had acted as evilly as Aphra (p.243).

Even Michael Mompellion, under the stress of his ordeals, lashes out verbally and physically when his anger overtakes him (p.19, p.222). Anna, too, reveals her own dark thoughts by admitting that her loneliness and suffering make her jealous of Michael and Elinor's loving relationship. (pp.228–9). It seems that in times of turmoil and suffering, no person is immune to dark thoughts and desires. Nevertheless, some characters possess greater self-awareness and are better equipped than others to successfully deal with their inner demons.

- What other events in *Year of Wonders* reveal humanity's capacity for evil and cruelty during times of crisis?

Transformation and rebirth

While *Year of Wonders* documents the horrors of the plague, it also explores how such an ordeal has the capacity to test individuals. Some characters never completely recover from the hardships, but despite extreme suffering and heartbreak others are strengthened and transformed by their experience. As such, the novel examines humanity's capacity for regeneration after catastrophic events. It also celebrates those characters that possess the necessary fortitude to emerge reborn from the devastation, and it honours the friendship, guidance and sacrifice of those characters who allow others to move beyond the station that they were seemingly destined to occupy.

Anna's journey from illiterate housemaid to scholar, doctor and independent woman is such a remarkable transformation that it provides the novel's title with

much of its significance. Many elements of this transformation have been previously noted, but it is worth emphasising that *Year of Wonders* suggests that such transformations do not occur simply by chance.

Much of Anna's transformation occurs as a result of the compassion and guidance of Elinor Mompellion. Through Anna and Elinor's relationship, the novel suggests that loving and nurturing friendships have the ability to transform lives and provide individuals with new opportunities. Nevertheless, *Year of Wonders* also suggests that an individual must possess special characteristics if they are to emerge reborn from a devastating event such as the plague. For example, it is Anna's immense courage and compassion that continually allow her to make the best of extremely harrowing circumstances and also to look beyond the prejudices and misconceptions of the time to follow what she regards as the most appropriate course of action.

Towards the end of the book there are two significant events that clearly symbolise Anna's growing awareness of her own transformation. Firstly, she tames Michael Mompellion's horse, Anteros, and rides him past the Boundary Stone (pp.272–4). Such an action symbolises her desire to leave the devastation of the plague behind. Furthermore, she knows that she has emerged from the plague reborn when she says:

We live, we live, we live, said the hoofbeats, and the drumming of my pulse answered them. I was alive, and I was young, and I would go on until I found some reason for it. As I rode that morning, smelling the scent of the hoof-crushed heather, feeling the wind needle my face until it tingled, I understood that where Michael Mompellion had been broken by our shared ordeal, in equal measure I had been tempered and made strong (pp.273–4).

Secondly, it is Anna's growing sense of self-determination that sees her rescue Mrs. Bradford's newborn child from death. While her actions are borne out of maternal instinct and the need to protect the defenceless, the rescue also

represents a moment of rebirth for Anna. By adopting the baby girl in order to 'raise her with love' (p.289), Anna challenges the dominant patriarchy of the period, becomes a mother once more and inadvertently forces herself to move beyond the confines of Eyam into the world of the unknown. Moreover, it is this event that sets her on the path to Oran where she becomes a scholar and doctor.

- What are the significant events that lead to Anna's transformation and rebirth?

Religion, nature and science

Year of Wonders celebrates the dawning of the Enlightenment in 17th-century England. Through Anna's growing awareness of humanity's links with the natural world and her belief in scientific observation, the novel affirms a need for intellectual inquiry over the dictates of blind faith. While religious vision binds the villagers together in their noble decision to quarantine the village, as the novel progresses the authority of a religious worldview is questioned. Mompellion's religious fervour narrows his vision and distorts elements of his marriage and it sometimes negatively colours his view of others. The villagers' prayers seem to go unanswered and even Mompellion is portrayed as hypocritical when his own faith is unable to withstand the pressure of his personal suffering. Religious fear is also shown to have negative consequences, as the villagers turn to self-flagellation, self-deprivation and witchcraft in an attempt to save themselves from the plague.

Nevertheless, the novel doesn't portray a wholly negative view of religious belief. Many of the novel's most admirable characters are its most religiously devoted. Religious belief does provide comfort and refuge during the crisis. Moreover, through regular church services religion appears to be the one force that unites the village throughout the ordeal. Somewhat paradoxically, it is Mompellion's religious vision that saves the village from complete annihilation. His declaration that all worldly goods should be burned is motivated by a desire to appease God;

however, the burning brings an end to the plague most probably because it destroys the fleas that carry the plague rather than because of any form of divine intervention. The Great Fire of London, similarly, is thought to have saved London from the plague by killing all the rats and the fleas that they carried.

The novel advocates its humanistic ideals through Anna's belief in humanity's link with the natural world and her recognition of people's ability to shape their own destiny. While Elinor recognises the importance of natural medicine, it is Anna alone who realises that 'Perhaps the plague was neither of God nor the Devil, but simply a thing in Nature' (p.215).

Anna also questions notions of predestination, God's will and whether people's time would be better utilised by trying to fight the plague scientifically:

It came to me then that we, all of us, spent a very great deal of time pondering these questions that, in the end, we could not answer. If we balanced the time we spent contemplating God, and why He afflicted us, with more thought as to how the Plague spread and poisoned our blood, then we might come nearer to saving our lives. While these thoughts were vexing, they brought with them also a chink of light. For if we could be allowed to see the Plague as a thing in Nature merely, we did not have to trouble about some grand celestial design that had to be completed before the disease would abate. We could simply work upon it as a farmer might toil to rid his field of unwanted tare, knowing that when we found the tools and the method and the resolve, we would free ourselves, no matter if we were a village full of sinners or a host of saints (p.215).

For Anna, the answers to combating the plague lie in the observation of nature and the application of solutions arrived at through processes very similar to scientific method. Anna and Elinor's processes of inquiry in researching, cataloguing and administering the herbs from the Gowdies' garden are also akin to empirical processes of trial and observation. The novel also seems to celebrate natural approaches to medicine over those applied by the surgeons of

the day. Many of the surgeons' solutions to the plague seem to have more in common with the largely superstitious and unfounded medical practices of the Middle and Dark Ages than with modern medicine. Hence, it is through the observations and experiences of the narrator, Anna Frith, that *Year of Wonders* appears to affirm humanity's capacity for self-determination through the natural sciences, rather than suggest that humanity is at the mercy of an omnipotent god that shapes people's destiny.

DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS

There is always more than one valid interpretation of a text. Moreover, there is always more than one approach to responding to an essay question. An interpretation of a text involves more than simply holding an opinion regarding an aspect of the text. In order to justify an interpretation of a text you must identify and explore relevant examples or evidence from the text to support your viewpoint. The following section explores a number of different interpretations of an essay question on *Year of Wonders*. Note how evidence can be found in the text to support two contrasting interpretations and responses to the question.

'Geraldine Brooks' *Year of Wonders* is a bleak exploration of human suffering and cruelty.' Discuss.

An essay that **agrees** with the statement might consider the following points.

The novel depicts the human suffering that results from the plague:

- Anna loses her children
- Two-thirds of the villagers lose their lives to the plague
- The shocking symptoms of the plague and the agonising deaths of its victims are recounted in vivid detail
- There appears to be no known cure for the plague; this creates an atmosphere of despair and helplessness in Eyam.

The plague causes great fear and misunderstanding which unleashes some individuals' innate evil:

- The villagers need to apportion blame results in the vicious murder of the Gowdies
- Josiah Bont exploits his fellow villagers and attempts to murder Christopher Unwin
- Aphra cruelly deceives the villagers by pretending to be the ghost of Anys Gowdie
- The punishments that are given to wrongdoers are extremely sadistic and reveal humanity's need for vengeance.

In contrast, an essay that **disagrees** with the statement might consider the following points.

The novel shows how friendship, love and compassion allow for human dignity in a time of crisis:

- The friendship of Anna and Elinor is based on a mutual respect for one another's compassion and love of humanity
- There are numerous instances of characters sacrificing their own needs in order to benefit others
- Even though it puts them in danger, people provide care and comfort to those suffering from the plague in order to alleviate their suffering and to provide them with comfort and dignity in death.

The novel demonstrates that it is possible for individuals to emerge from the plague strengthened by their experience:

- Anna emerges from the plague as an accomplished midwife and natural healer
- Anna's bravery allows her to save Mrs Bradford's child; this causes her to flee to Oran where she becomes a doctor and scholar

- Anna recognises that she must live every day rather than dwelling morosely on the past
- Anna emerges from the novel with a sense of being able to create her own destiny.

ESSAY TOPICS

1. 'While many characters in *Year of Wonders* display admirable qualities, Anna Frith is the true heroine of the novel.' Do you agree?
2. 'In *Year of Wonders* it is the female characters who display the greatest strength and resilience.' Do you agree?
3. 'More than anything else, it is Anna's courage and determination that results in her eventual emancipation.' Do you agree?
4. 'In *Year of Wonders* all characters who survive the plague emerge transformed.' Discuss.
5. 'The true heroes in *Year of Wonders* are those who put others' needs ahead of their own.' Discuss.
6. '*Year of Wonders* demonstrates the sinister side of religious fervour.' Discuss.
7. '*Year of Wonders* demonstrates that times of crisis bring out the darker side of human nature.' Discuss.
8. '*Year of Wonders* suggests that nature and religion will always be opposing forces.' Discuss.
9. 'From death and destruction inevitably comes rebirth.' Discuss in relation to *Year of Wonders*.
10. '*Year of Wonders* is a story of great courage in the face of extreme adversity.' Discuss.

11. 'It is the first-person narration of Anna Frith that makes *Year of Wonders* so emotionally engaging for readers.' Do you agree?
12. 'Anna Frith's narration of events in *Year of Wonders* conveys the idea that humanity is at the mercy of the natural world.' Discuss.

Analysing a sample topic

'*Year of Wonders* demonstrates that a time of crisis brings out the darker side of human nature.' Discuss.

The first thing to do with any essay topic is to identify the key phrases and define them so that they have meaning relevant to the context of the novel. In this essay topic the phrases that need to be defined are 'time of crisis' and 'darker side of human nature'. 'Time of crisis' could refer directly to the devastation and confusion caused by a plague that appears to have no apparent cure. The term 'darker side of human nature' could take on a number of meanings in the context of the novel. It might refer to people's capacity to exploit others for their own benefit; humanity's capacity to revert to barbarity during times of fear; the need to control or exert power over others or the refusal to accept responsibility when faced with danger.

After defining key terms you must then judge whether you agree, disagree, or partially agree with the essay topic. In most cases, the better text responses are those that attempt to address the 'grey areas' of the topic rather than completely agreeing or disagreeing with the proposition. For example, in some situations the horrors of the plague do cause individuals to act abhorrently. Nevertheless, there are a number of instances where characters act out of a true sense of altruism and the need to maintain order and human dignity.

After defining key terms you now need to develop a contention that contains the defined key terms and responds to all parts of the essay topic. An appropriate essay contention in this case might be:

Although the devastation and climate of fear brought about by the plague results in some abhorrent and repugnant human behaviour in Geraldine Brooks' *Year of Wonders*, the novel also affirms humanity's capacity for compassion, bravery and dignity during times of suffering and confusion.

Having written the contention for the essay, the next stage is to construct three to four supporting arguments that explore all aspects of your main argument. Some appropriate supporting arguments here might be:

- The climate of uncertainty brought about by the plague results in some individuals directing their anger and misplaced fear against other villagers.
- The confusion and devastation caused by the pestilence allows some individuals to exploit others for their own selfish needs.
- Despite the great suffering resulting from the plague, many characters display great selflessness and compassion towards their fellow humans.
- Even though the plague decimates the village's population, strong bonds of love and friendship survive.

The next thing to do is to briefly identify the relationships, events or quotes that you will use to develop each of your supporting arguments. Once you have done this you should have a sound essay plan to follow when writing your text response essay.

THE TEXT

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